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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, gradual changes have occurred in some aspects of the social roles taken by men and women. More women with children work outside the home and some men have become very involved in caring for their children. Whether or not such changes have influenced the thinking of members of traditional families and influence parent/child interactions is a matter of some interest. This paper presents findings of a study comparing the upbringing of 2-year-old boys and girls from 40 two-parent families residing in London, England and differing widely in social and educational backgrounds. None of the mothers worked full-time, but 23 percent had part-time jobs. All fathers were employed. More than half the fathers had no formal educational qualifications; mothers were slightly better qualified. Attitudes of the children's mothers and fathers are discussed, particularly their feelings about women working when they have young children, fathers participating in child care or housework, and families with reversed roles. These attitudinal data are considered in relation to observations of parent behavior with their children. In addition, parental beliefs about the nature of masculinity, femininity, gender differences in the preschool period, and their theories concerning the origins of gender differences are described. (Author/RH)

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Parents of the Future. What are they learning about the roles of men and women in society?

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PARENTS OF THE FUTURE. WHAT ARE THEY LEARNING ABOUT THE ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN IN SOCIETY?

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There have been gradual changes over the past decade in some aspects of the roles taken by men and women in society. In particular, more women with children work outside the home and some men have become very involved in child-care. But have these changes influenced the way in which more traditional families think and do their attitudes affect the way in which they interact with their children?

This paper presents some of the findings of a study designed to compare the upbringing of two year old girls and boys. The attitudes of their mothers and fathers, from a wide range of social and educational backgrounds, will be presented. In particular, their feelings about women with young children working, fathers participating in child-care or housework and families with "reversed roles" will be outlined and related to their own behaviour with their two year old. Beliefs about the nature of masculinity, femininity, gender diferences in the preschool period and their theories concerning the origins of gender differences will be described

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Society is gradually changing in that more women pursue careers and a small number of men are choosing to care for their children as a full time occupation. But what do more 'traditional' parents, rearing the majority of the children likely to be mothers and fathers at the turn of the century, think about the roles of men and women in society, about masculinity and femininity and about gender differences? Do their attitudes influence the way that they are bringing up their children and have they changed much from the views held several decades ago? As part of a study comparing the experiences of two year olds girls and boys at home with their parents these questions were examined.

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THE SAMPLE AND METHOD

The sample was a group of 40 London two-parent families, fairly representative of those living in S.E. England in terms of Social Class, education and maternal occupation.

Based upon paternal occupation, 43% were middle-class and 57% working class (Registrar General's Classification). All had first borns between the ages of 24 and 33 months, 20 with a girl and 20 with a boy. None of the mothers worked full-time but 9 (23%) had part-time jobs. All the fathers were employed. More than half the fathers had no formal educational qualifications, while the mothers were slightly better qualified.

Table 1. Characteristics ofthe sample

SOCIAL CLASS	I,II	IIINM	IIIM	IV,V
N=40	13	4	19	4
	(33%)	(10%)	(47%)	(10%)

EDUCATION

	Fathers	Mothers
no qualifications	21 (53%)	15 (37%)
at least 1 CSE	2 (5%)	1 (3%)
at least 1 'O' level	5 (12%)	10 (25%)
'A' level, OND	5 (12%)	3 (8%)
diploma (nurse,HND)	2 (5%)	5 (12%)
degree,teacher training	5 (12%)	6 (15%)

Mothers and fathers were observed at home with their two-year old child and subsequently questioned about various aspects of child rearing, attitudes towards the roles of men and women and their concepts of femininity and masculinity.

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WORKING MOTHERS

Our stated beliefs often correspond with our actions, so it is not surprising that this group of parents should think a mothers's place is at home.

More than a third (29, 37%) were definitely against women with children under 5 years old working outside the home. Only 11 (14%) thought it might be good for some mothers, most of these also women (8).

Table 2. Attitudes about working mothers

	Mothers	Fathers
Disapprove strongly	13 (33)	16 (41)
Only if she has to i.e.financially	15 (37)	14 (36)
Only if child-care is carefully chosen	4 (10)	6 (15)
Good for some women	8 (20)	3 (8)

OPINIONS, WORKING MOTHERS

"Perhaps I'm old fashioned but I think the mother's place is in the home.....I'm against education for women, it's a waste of resources. They ought to concentrate on what they are designed for, they should stay at home and let school leavers have the jobs."
(Middle-class father)

"It's disgraceful, the child misses a lot, its security, the mother is the anchor of the familiy, she adds stability"
(Working class father)

"Psychologically I don't think its advisable, I've got a friend who's a childminder and the children call her "Mummy". These are tender years, you have to establish who your Mum is"
(Working class mother)

"Good luck to them. I don't know how they do it but some do like to be away. I've got a friend who goes to work to have a rest!"
(Working class mother)

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They were more positive about fathers participating in child-care, though only 31 (39%) thought that they (or their husband) really did as much as they could. The men were slightly more complacent than the women, many mothers commenting that they did not bother to encourage help.

Table 3. Attitudes about fathers, housework & childcare

	Mothers	Fathers
They should not do either	2 (5)	1 (2)
Childcare but not housework	10 (25)	11 (28)
Both, but I (spouse) do not	15 (38)	9 (23)
Both, and I (spouse) do as much as possible	13 (32)	18 (46)

The jobs done reflected attitudes expressed. Putting to bed or giving baths were favourite, but not putting on the nappy or getting up in the night. Many fathers often prepared breakfast, but few regularly cooked meals for their children. Very few often dressed their child, but most did once or twice a week.

Table 4. Reported Childcare by fathers

(N=39)	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Give a bath	13	9	17
Put on nappy	13	14	12
Put to bed	6	9	24
Up in night	15	15	9
Breakfast	8	17	14
Cooked meal	21	11	7
Dress child	8	26	5

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Child-care was not related to their child's gender with the exception of baths, which 11 fathers of boys did often compared to 6 girls' fathers. 10/20 fathers of girls rarely or never did, compared to 3 boys' fathers (p.02, Tau C .38).

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What do these parents think about changing the traditional roles of men and women? They were asked what they thought about families in which the father stayed at home to care for the children while the mother went out to work. They were not on the whole opposed to the idea.

Table 5. Attitudes about "reverse-role" families

	Mothers	Fathers
A very odd idea	8 (20)	8 (20)
Don't really object	6 (15)	10 (26)
A good idea for some people	17 (43)	12 (31)
A very good idea	9 (22)	9 (23)

The question "Would they themselves consider swapping roles?" brought quite a different response. The overwhelming answer, from the men particularly (72%) was "No, I'm very happy as I am". However, a third of the mothers said they had thought about it, rejecting the idea for practical reasons, usually that they would earn much less.

Table 6. Would they consider reverse roles for themselves?

	Mothers	Fathers
No, very happy as I am	19 (47)	28 (72)
No, Spouse would never agree to it	6 (15)	3 (8)
No because I (ie.mother) could not earn enough	13 (33)	6 (15)
Have considered it seriously	2 (5)	2 (5)

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The parents were asked if they would consider changing roles in the event of the man's unemployment. Nearly a third were quite against the idea under any circumstances though slightly more would be happy to swap for as long as necessary. The men and women had very similar views.

Table 7. Would they reverse roles if the father lost his job

	Mothers	Fathers
Not under any circumstances	12 (30)	13 (33)
Yes, for a limited time	13 (33)	11 (28)
Yes, for as long as necessary	15 (38)	15 (38)

The parents were finally asked if they thought the roles of women and men were becoming more interchangeable. Did they think that more families would reverse work/home roles. Most did in fact expect change, though their previous answers showed that they did not really want it for themselves.

Table 8. Is Society changing in terms of ideas about the roles of men and women?

	Mothers	Fathers
No change is likely	13 (32)	12 (31)
Change, due to rising unemployment of men	18 (45)	7 (18)
Change, following a change in attitudes	9 (23)	20 (51)

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WHAT IS RELATED TO IDEAS ABOUT GENDER ROLES?

The responses to the six questions on adult gender roles were added together to make an "egalitarianism" score. This was studied in relation to the following variables:

Partner's Ideas:

The scores of the mothers and fathers were highly correlated (Pearson correlation =0.53, p<.001). However, for only one of the 6 questions were more than half the couples in complete agreement, whether they would consider a role swap for themselves. 25/29 agreed, 19 of whom were those responding that they certainly did not.

Gender of parent:

There was no effect of parental gender upon attitudes (mean scores: women,13.8; men,13.4).

Gender of child:

There was no significant effect of child's gender, though the trend was for those with a son to be more egalitarian, perhaps because it seemed slightly more likely for a father to stay at home to care for a boy than a girl (mean scores: Boys,14.2; girls,13.0,n.s.).

Education:

There was no relationship between educational level and attitude for mothers or fathers (Pearson's Correlation: mothers .004; fathers -.0002).

Social Class:

There was a small social class effect, only significant for the mothers, middle class parents having higher mean scores (mean scores:mothers, MC 14.9, WC 13.0, t=1.76, p<.05; fathers, MC 14.2, WC 12.7, t=1.26, ns.)

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Fathers

The total egalitarianism score was correlated with a number of other behaviours. Some results were as predicted.

Egalitarian fathers of boys: selected fewer toys from a list as unsuitable for boys to play with (r -.44) ,engaged in less rough and tumble play (r -.36),made more suggestions for activities of a domestic nature (r .51), reported less smacking (r-.52), less often reported that their sons tried to hurt them deliberately (r -.47) and their sons had more dolls (r .44).

However, the egalitarian fathers of girls seemed fairly traditional in that they were observed to use less physical discipline (r -.42) and were more protective in giving more warnings of possible danger (r .41) than those who had low egalitarianism scores.

Mothers

Children of egalitarian mothers had fewer domestic toys (girls, r -.48; boys r -.45) and boys had more dolls (r .41). A high score was also associated with more kissing of sons (.39) and less kissing or hugging daughters (r -.40; r -.50). Those with high scores had sons who were less skilled in dressing themselves (r -.53) but the boys were also given fewer offers of help generally (r-.37), their mothers engaged in less joint play (r -.45) and made fewer suggestions for play (r -.52). This might indicate a long term strategy for developing independence rather than expecting to be waited upon.

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MASCULINITY/FEMININITY

More than three quarters of the children were perceived by their parents in terms of masculine or feminine traits, mainly "appropriate" ones.

Table 9

Extent to which girls were perceived to be feminine by parents, and agreement between parents

	(4) Very feminine	(3) Fairly feminine	(2) Not particularly feminine	(1) Opposite to feminine
Mothers	9 (45%)	4 (20%)	3 (15%)	4 (20%)
Fathers	8 (40%)	3 (15%)	6 (30%)	3 (15%)
Agreement between Mothers and fathers	7	2	2	1

Table 10

Extent to which boys were perceived to be masculine by parents, and agreement between parents

	(4) Very masculine	(3) Fairly masculine	(2) Not particularly masculine	(1) Opposite to masculine
Mothers n = 19	10 (53%)	4 (21%)	4 (21%)	1 (5%)
Fathers n = 19	13 (68%)	3 (16%)	2 (11%)	1 (5%)
Agreement between mothers and fathers	7	1	0	1

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Table II

Attribute/behaviour which parents thought of as feminine and not feminine, in rank order

(1) Feminine

Mothers	Times mentioned	Fathers	Times mentioned
Vain or likes to be admired	6	Plays with dolls and nurtures them	7
Does not like being dirty	5	Vain or likes to be admired	4
Likes/interested in clothes	4	Is gentle	4
Likes to use make-up	3	Likes/interested in clothes	3
Likes to have hair put up	3	Does housework	3
Plays with dolls and nurtures them	3	Copies mother	2
Is pretty	2	Is affectionate	1
Copies mother	2	Is shy	1
Takes care of toys	2	Is scared of loud noises	1
Coaxes to get own way	1	Coaxes to get own way	1
Is quiet	1	Is not rough with toys	1
Is polite	1	Does not want to be dirty	1
Is affectionate	1	Is interested in make-up	1
Likes babies	1		
Likes to dance	1		

(2) Not feminine

Is very active	7	Is aggressive	3
Fights	1	Is very active	2
Likes toy cars	1	Does not cry when falls	1
		Is independent	1
		Likes rough and tumble	1

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Table 12

Attribute/behaviour which parents thought of as masculine and not masculine, in rank order

(1) Masculine

Mother	Times mentioned	Father	Times mentioned
Likes football	5	Likes to use tools	6
Likes cars, bikes etc.	4	Is energetic or active	6
Likes rough and tumble	4	Wants to be with/copy father	4
Uses father's tools	3	Likes football or sports	4
Is daring and adventurous	3	Likes to fight/wrestle	3
Likes to get dirty	3	Likes to get dirty	1
Races around fast	2	Is strong	1
Tough (ie.brave) when falls	2	Is rough with toys	1
Is rough with things	2	Tough (brave) when falls	1
Wants to be with father	2	Wants to stand up for self	1
Is strong	1	Likes to build things	1
Likes guns	1	Likes to climb	1

(2) Not masculine

Likes dolls	2	Will not stand up for self	2
Has soppy speech	1	Likes dolls	1
Likes soft toys	1	Is gentle	1
Is gentle with sibling	1	Is timid	1

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MISTAKEN GENDER

The parents were concerned that their child's gender should be clearly identifiable. Nearly three quarters of the girls' mothers (14) recalled at least one case of mistaken gender but only 6 of those with boys. Mothers of girls were more often upset about these incidents than those with sons (Tau C.44, $p<.01$). Fathers were not as concerned, but still made sure they corrected the errors

Table 13. Parent reactions to mistaken gender

		GIRLS	BOYS
Corrected upset	MOTHERS	7 (35%)	1 (5%)
	FATHERS	1 (5%)	1 (5%)
Corrected not upset	MOTHERS	3 (15%)	4 (20%)
	FATHERS	6 (30%)	1 (5%)
Not corrected	MOTHERS	4 (20%)	1 (5%)
	FATHERS	1 (5%)	1 (5%)
No mistakes	MOTHERS	6 (30%)	14 (70%)
	FATHERS	12 (60%)	16 (85%)

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GENDER DIFFERENCES AT TWO YEARS

More than half the parents (57%) thought that there were differences between girls and boys in this age group. Their response were positively correlated with the extent to which their own child was perceived as masculine or feminine (Pearson correlation: mothers 0.47; fathers .37). Boys were thought to be more active and rough, to like cars, climbing and fighting. Girls were said to be gentler and quieter, to like dolls and educational games.

Table 14

Numbers of mothers and fathers who thought girls and boys behaved differently at age 2-2½

Parents	Many differences	A few difference	None at this age	Do not know
Mothers n = 40	12 (30%)	11 (27%)	17 (43%)	0
Fathers n = 39	9 (23%)	13 (33%)	15 (38%)	2 (5%)

Kendall's Tau C = -.07, p = .66

Table 15

Numbers of parents who thought that girls and boys behaved differently, in relation to their own child's gender

Parents	Many differences	A few differences	None at this age	Do not know
Of girls n = 40	11 (27%)	10 (25%)	19 (48%)	0
Of boys n = 39	10 (26%)	14 (36%)	13 (33%)	2 (5%)

Kendall's Tau C = .03, p = .38

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The parents overwhelmingly had an environmental explanation. Only 2 fathers and 7 mothers thought biological factors had a major effect. Within the group of fathers, those with sons were significantly more likely to give a "nurture" explanation (tau .26. p<.05).

Table 16

Explanations of the origins of gender-specific differences between children

Parent	Nature	Interaction	Nurture	Test	Signif.
Fathers of girls	2 (10%	6 (30%)	12 (60%)		
				Tau=.26	.08(2tail)
Fathers of boys	0	3 (16%)	16 (84%)		
Mothers of girls	4 (20%)	5 (25%)	11 (55)		
				Tau=.14	.36(2tail)
Mothers of boys	3 (15%)	3 (15%)	14 (70%)		
Fathers	2 (5%)	9 (23%)	28 (72%)		
				Tau=.12	.32(2tail)
Mothers	7 (17%)	8 (20%)	25 (63%)		
Total	9 (11%)	17 (22%)	53 (67%)		

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HOW DO PARENTS USE THEIR INFLUENCE?

Having an environmental viewpoint did not mean that many of the parents equated it with the possibility of encouraging girls and boys to be more similar. Most seemed quite aware that they could and would develop differences.

"I suppose it's the way they are brought up. I tell him (2 year old) to dig in the garden and look for worms. I wouldn't show his sister creepy crawlies. You're rough with a boy and want to nurse a girl and keep her small, you want a boy to grow up and dig the garden."
(father)

"It's a lot to do with their parents really at that age, I wouldn't put much down to genetics. It's probably mostly the way their Dad treats them"
(mother)

"If you have a boy you might tend to box, a lot of it depends on the parents. There are not many fathers that wouldn't start fighting with a boy, rough him up a bit"
(mother)

"You do more for boys, you encourage girls to do it and you do more for boys. (Q Do you think there is a biological influence?) Oh no, you could bring up a boy like a girl, it's what you make of them"
(mother)

"It's the way they are brought up. Parents have great influence, telling them what to do and what not to do."
(father)

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